

The Visit
By Bill O'Brien

Part of my job description as a Washington bureaucrat is to explain and defend the Federal Aviation Regulations (FARs). So about 30 plus times a year, Washington headquarters opens the front door a crack and pushes out a sacrificial lamb (me) to go talk to, and listen to, mechanics, IAs, repair stations, manufacturers, and air carriers.

While at times I have my hands full explaining and defending the regulations, and despite an occasional wrestling match with a mechanic in the murky mire of an obscure regulation, I really do enjoy playing the instructor role and providing the folks in the audience with some useful information that they can use on the hangar floor the next day.

This past June, I received a call from Wally Bevans, airworthiness supervisor from the Memphis FSDO. He asked me if I could be the after dinner speaker at the Mid-South Maintenance Forum that they were going to hold October 3 to 4. I begged off, gently reminding him that I consider myself only a fair, part-time instructor and not a very good after dinner speaker — especially since I tried it once and my thigh muscles in my legs locked up after 10 minutes of standing up straight and they had to carry me from the lectern.

Wally didn't buy that. So I then told him that my crystal ball was all crazed over, so I wasn't very good in describing the aviation global vision thing, and I had no idea where the industry is going to be five years from now. Wally didn't buy that either.

So I figured stony silence might work — bad mistake. Wally jumped in the vacuum and reminded me of some outstanding markers that I owed him; and in a word, I caved in. His final words to me were to make the speech entertaining, creative, and inspiring and to make it an hour long. "An hour long!" I shouted into the phone. "Don't you think these folks in the audience would like to go to the bathroom after eating? Are you nuts?" But Wally had the final word because I was yelling into a dead receiver.

After working long weekends and using up all of my next 10 years allotment of creativity and inspiration, the speech in its final form was divided into two parts: one for pilots in the audience and the other for mechanics. The one for mechanics is what follows. I hope you enjoy it.

The Visit

It is time for the second half of my presentation which is for the mechanics in the audience. It is called "The Visit." My message is presented in the form of a 17 stanza quatrain which I came across in my travels. A quatrain is a series of four lines or stanza. In each stanza, the first and second and the third and fourth lines rhyme with one another. I have chosen this different and rather risky form of communication because I believe it makes it easier to present my message. Whether or not "The Visit" makes the impression that I want to leave with you, please remember that today I read a quatrain; not a poem. I do not want you to say to your aviation friends and colleagues that O'Brien read a poem in public, in Memphis, TN. Imagine the harm it would do to my already questionable FAA reputation.

Here for your consideration is the quatrain that I called "The Visit:"

In a LAX hangar, dark one night, an A&P sat in misery and pain.
When silently through a locked hangar door the devil came.
The dark one saluted him with a lopsided leer.
And hissed, "Dear friend, why do you sit grieving here?"

The mechanic leaped when he saw that hellish face.
But bravely stood his ground and began to make his case.

Beelzebub:— “A wrench I am and a wrench I’ll be.
I grieve because no one will ever think more of me!”

“Tell me more,” whispered the crowned Prince of Lies.
As the fires of opportunity flared up in his eyes.
“I am trapped in this hangar, chained to this box
Judged by all as a greasy, dirty, stupid, old ox.”

“I labored for years on aircraft costing millions each.
For B scale wages that kept my dreams just out of reach.
For years I have fought the FAA, corrosion, and unapproved parts.
Just so I can retire in a one-star rated, mobile home trailer park.”

“I see your sad predicament,” the Demon softly exclaimed.
“But can’t you see that a mechanic’s fate is preordained?
“There’s no fine future for you, success can’t be yours.
You will spend your last years on this cold hangar floor.”

The mechanic rallied and stared hard into those evil red eyes.
“I’ll get more training, I’ll go back to school, I’ll specialize.
I’ll get into electronics, learn composites, and even NDI.
These are the skills the airlines and repair stations will buy.”

“Noble try,” said the Evil One, “Damn! You put on a really good show.
But aren’t you the one who presently makes less than you owe?
Training is expensive and the technical courses are tough.
Are you sure in your heart that you have the right stuff?

“My friend, I see no bright future for your profession.
Rejection and failures are common life lessons.
Give up! Roll over! Don’t try for the stars.
All aviation gave you are hands covered with scars.

“Many eons ago I had similar dreams of ambition, power, and fame.
Despite my best efforts I failed miserably just the same.
Please take advice from this expert on what a loser must be.
It’s only when you accept your limitations, will you truly be free.

“So relax, back off, from these dreams chock-full of ambition.
Any attempt to improve your career will lead only to frustration.”
The A&P’s self confidence evaporated and his eyes filled with tears.
This brief conversation with Satan confirmed his worst fears.

The A&P wiped his eyes and said to himself, “There’s no glory for me.
I am a pathetic old fool to dream of a future that could never be.”
“A&P farewell, my visit is done. I will see you no more.”
And the beast silently disappeared through the locked hangar door.

The mechanic just stood there watching evil retire.

When he suddenly realized what had just transpired.
Overcome with anguish, the A&P sagged into an old wooden chair.
And cradled his head in his arms and sunk deeper into despair.

In hell's foulest pit, the Demon Prince celebrated.
For experience told him, the mechanic had capitulated.
To hell's damned souls he screamed: "That A&P's soul I'll soon possess.
And it's mine because the fool failed the self confidence test.

But what makes this victory for the mechanic's soul even more grand.
Was that mechanic had the answer right in the palm of his hand.
With just a little more education, sweat, pain, and some tears
He could turn his sad life around in just a few short years."

"How do you know a visit is due?" a red goblin dared to inquire.
"The mechanic tells me," Lucifer said, as he stoked hell's smoky fires.
"When I visit repair shops and hangar floors I listen hard to hear
five little words: 'I am just a mechanic' to reach my ears.

"When those five words are spoken, a mechanic apologizes for his trade.
I intuitively know that he has now become both alone and afraid
He already believes he cannot compete in a world of new technology.
So to steal his poor soul only takes a little bit of psychology.

"Over the next few visits I attack his confidence and self esteem,
Always raising doubts in his ability to fulfill his dreams.
I tell him that education and training are not his friend
Telling him constantly he is too old or too stupid to win in the end.

"Sometimes, but not often, a mechanic catches me in this lie.
Beaten by the truth, I must retreat, and plan once again for yet another try.
But now, no more questions goblin. I have work to do, leave me be.
For it is time to visit a mechanic in Memphis, Tennessee."

To summarize, the quatrain called "The Visit" was a gentle reminder of how hard it is to remain a good mechanic. No matter how hard or how long you work, effort and experience does not guarantee personal success.

For mechanics to remain competitive in today's global maintenance marketplace, each mechanic must examine his or her attitude toward change. If one sees change as a threat, he or she will resist it and fight for the status quo, and remain forever in a stagnate and shrinking aviation maintenance environment.

If one sees change as an opportunity, one will be surprised, with a little advance planning and preparation, of how many doors will open for you. But opportunity will only take you so far. You must also have the burning desire to be the best — a professional. This single desire is by itself the one attitude that can guarantee success.

In closing, when you hear another mechanic say, "I am just a mechanic," as a friend, tell him or her that those words are like wearing a neon sign that says that he has lost heart, that he is on his way to becoming a "9 to 5" mechanic, a Joe Paycheck, an individual who rarely makes a contribution.

And if we mechanics cannot make a contribution, then why are we here? Are we waiting for a visit?